Fostering teachers’ experiences of well-being: A participatory action learning and action research approach

E WESSELS
23418338

Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts of Positive Psychology at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University

Supervisor: Prof L Wood
Co-Supervisor: Dr V Koen

November 2016
Summary

Teachers face many challenges with regard to their well-being. A growing body of research indicates that if teacher well-being could improve, a more enabling climate for teaching and learning would be created. The aim of this study was to work collaboratively with teachers to help them find ways to improve their well-being. Following a PALAR design, the nine participating Foundation Phase teachers, met as an action learning set over a period of six weeks to reflect on their learning about how to improve their well-being. The findings indicated that frequent, informal social contact with colleagues, coupled with positive psychology activities, could improve teachers’ well-being. This study will contribute to theory about the improvement of teachers’ well-being and the ways participatory research could help to enhance their ability to sustain such learning, despite working in difficult circumstances.

This dissertation is presented in three sections. The first section reflects the first phase, the literature study and ethical application. The second section contains the main research report in article format and the third section covers the concluding thoughts and reflections on the research process.

Key words: Flourishing, positive psychology, supportive role, teacher well-being, well-being.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the following persons who assisted me in the submission of this study:

- Prof. Lesley Wood for her time, commitment, patience and guidance throughout this study, Dr Vicki Koen for her input and guidance, and Prof. M. P. Wissing, the leader of the MAPP programme;
- the teachers at Ipeleeng Primary School who allowed me a view on their world and who worked cooperatively to learn about and research their well-being;
- my family, my husband who constantly motivated me and listened to all my proposals and guided me in a patient, wise way. Moreover, I thank him for his financial support during the empirical part of the study. I would also like to thank my six children and four grandchildren who sacrificed family time.
- Finally, I would like to thank God for giving me this great love for teachers and providing me with health and endurance to finish this task.
Preface

This dissertation is submitted in article format as indicated in the 2015 General Academic Rules (A4.1.1.4 and A4.4.2.9) of the North-West University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the taught Master of Arts degree in Positive Psychology (60 credits of the total of 180 credits for Curriculum G801P).

The body of the dissertation consists of three sections, namely Section 1, which reflects on the first stage and preparation for the research and manuscript. Section 2 comprises the research report in article format, which has been prepared according to the requirements of the specific journal (*Perspectives in Education*) to which it will be submitted. Section 3 provides a brief summative conclusion and reflection on the research process.
Letter of Permission

The co-authors hereby give permission to the first author to submit this article for purposes of a dissertation. The first author conducted the study, which included the literature review, qualitative analysis and interpretation of the data. She drafted the manuscript and incorporated all suggestions from the co-authors into the manuscript.

Prof. Lesley Wood

Dr. Vicki Koen
Declaration by Language Editor

Jackie Viljoen  
Language Editor and Translator  
16 Bergzicht Gardens  
Fijnbos Close  
STRAND 7140

Accredited member of the South African Translators’ Institute  
No APSTrans 1000017  
Member of the Professional Editors’ Group (PEG)

DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the thesis by ELSABE WESSELS was properly language edited but without viewing the final version.

The track changes function was used and the author was responsible for accepting the editor’s changes and for finalising the reference list.

Title of thesis:  
Fostering teachers’ experiences of well-being: A participatory action learning and action research approach

JACKIE VILJOEN  
Strand  
South Africa  
11 November 2016
Table of Contents

Summary ...........................................................................................................................................i

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................ii

Preface ................................................................................................................................................iii

Letter of permission ..........................................................................................................................iv

Declaration by language editor ........................................................................................................v

Table of contents ................................................................................................................................vi

Section 1 ...............................................................................................................................................1

1.1 Background and orientation ........................................................................................................1

1.2 Approved procedure for this study .............................................................................................2

Research proposal Master of Arts in Positive Psychology ...............................................................3

References ..........................................................................................................................................21

1.3 Approved HREC application ......................................................................................................26

1.4 Summary ....................................................................................................................................33

Section 2 ...............................................................................................................................................34

2.1 Manuscript in article format ........................................................................................................34

2.1.1 Guidelines to authors for Perspectives in Education ..........................................................34

2.2 Manuscript ................................................................................................................................38

Fostering Teachers’ Experiences of Well-Being: ............................................................................38

A Participatory Action Learning and Action Research Approach ....................................................38

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................38
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ........................................................................................................................................ 38

**Conceptualising teacher well-being** ................................................................................................. 40

**Participatory action learning and action research as methodology** .................................................. 41

**Discussion of findings** ....................................................................................................................... 45

  - *Theme one: Improvement in relational well-being* ........................................................................... 45
  - *Theme two: Improvements in individual well-being* ..................................................................... 50
    - The PALAR process allowed for gradual shifts in experiences of stress................................. 50
    - Simple changes led to significant improvements in experiences of well-being.................... 51
  - *Theme three: PALAR process enables teacher agency towards well-being* ......................... 52

**Concluding remarks** ......................................................................................................................... 55

**References** ......................................................................................................................................... 56

**Section 3** ............................................................................................................................................ 60

**Conclusion and reflection** ................................................................................................................ 60

  - 3.1 Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 60
  - 3.2 Reflection .................................................................................................................................... 62
Section 1

1.1 Background and orientation

As indicated in the Preface, this dissertation is conducted in article format as prescribed in the 2015 General Academic Rules (A4.1.1.4 and A4.4.2.9) of the North-West University (NWU). This section will reflect the first phase of the research process leading up to the manuscript as the main research report, presented in Section 2.

A literature study was conducted and a research proposal developed, which firstly had to be approved by a subject research group and secondly by the AUTHeR Research Proposal Committee of the African Unit for Transdisciplinary Health Research (AUTHeR). After approval of the proposal by AUTHeR, an application for ethics approval of the study was prepared for the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the North-West University and submitted. The approved documents are included in this section. No all the addenda specified in the list for the HREC application are included for purposes of this thesis.

All the documents concern the same research project in different phases; thus, there might be an overlap between these documents, as well as with parts of the manuscript in Section 2, which is the final research report.
# 1.2 Approved procedure for this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cover page for research proposal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discipline</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Surname</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name初initials</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cell phone number</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date of first registration for above-mentioned degree</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student number</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title of thesis/dissertation/mini-dissertation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study leader/promoter</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Help-/-co-leader/promoter</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of times of submission of this protocol (Mark were applicable)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Does this project fall under a greater umbrella project?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>If yes, ethical number of the umbrella project</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title of the umbrella project</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leader of the umbrella project</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Specific aims of umbrella project whereby this study links

Will new data be collected? | Yes | No | X

Names of small group panel within the school/unit that approved this research protocol (before sent to AUTHeR)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Prof. MP Wissing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Dr S Chigeza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Dr M de Chavonnes Vrugt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Prof. N Diko</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Date of approval by above mentioned panel

20/07/2015

Research proposal Master of Arts in Positive Psychology

1.2.1 Title: Fostering teachers’ experiences of well-being: A participatory action learning and action research approach

Key words: flourishing, Positive Psychology, supportive role, teacher well-being, well-being.

1.2.2 Introduction

This proposal outlines a study to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being. The proposal explores the background and rationale of the study, concepts of fostering teachers’ well-being, an examination of the PERMA framework as well as the proposed research methodology of participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) adopted in this study. The study will be conducted at a rural setting close to the North-West University, Mafikeng Campus (NWU, MC), with primary school teachers.
1.2.3 Background and rationale

Teachers in socio-economically challenging contexts are working in difficult circumstances due to a lack of infrastructure and teaching resources (Chapman & Harris, 2004; Dehaloo, 2011). From experience at these schools in the rural area in close vicinity of NWU (MC) over the past three years, it is known that the majority of classrooms are overcrowded and under-resourced. Furthermore, in these classrooms, teachers have to accommodate a range of learners with diverse psychosocial needs, stemming from the multiple adversities attributable to their socio-economic circumstances (Morgan, 2009). One would expect support for these teachers; however, they are often blamed when learners perform poorly in the national assessment tests. Teachers are slated in the press for a lack of professionalism and are generally touted as the cause of education being in crisis (Masondo, 2014).

Policy requires that teachers be able to perform a supportive role (Department of Higher Education [DHE], 2015) notwithstanding the fact that they have little or no training in this regard. Although it is true that teachers are expected to provide a supportive and care-giving role regarding learners, colleagues and parents, what is not recognised by the educational system is that these teachers need support themselves. The result is that teacher well-being suffers, leaving them demotivated, stressed and unable to deal with their diverse circumstances (Horn, 2009). A growing body of research (Frederickson, 2001; Keyes, 2007; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) indicates that if well-being could be improved, individuals would flourish. Human flourishing is associated with innovative and flexible behaviour (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Thus, if teachers could flourish, they would be better prepared to fulfil their role as supportive, care-giving teachers.

In a study by Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013), the researchers explored how positive psychology activities (PPA) increase well-being. They define PPAs as “simple, intentional,
and regular practices meant to mimic the myriad healthy thoughts and behaviours associated with naturally happy people” (p. 57). The results of their study indicated that practicing PPAs might increase well-being by satisfying basic psychological needs. Table 1 indicate PPAs that might be applicable in this study:

**Table 1: Positive psychology activities (PPA)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best possible selves (King, 2001)</th>
<th>King (2001), developed a procedure:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Write for 20 minutes at a time about different experiences and topics.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The specific instructions are: “Think about your life in the future. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of all of your life dreams”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next, dedicate 5 minutes, writing about a specific goal or activity that could facilitate this best possible self.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Savoring</th>
<th>Savoring is the capacity to attend to, appreciate and enhance the positive experiences in life. Savoring can include recollection of positive and pleasurable experiences of the past; attentive experience of the present and anticipation of events in the future. Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, and Mikolajczak (2010) identified four spontaneous savoring techniques. These are:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural display: Individuals exhibit their positive affect through mannerisms and gestures, like smiling or pumping the air with their fist.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being present: Deliberately maintaining attention on an immediate experience.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalising: Individuals celebrate positive events with other people.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive mental time travel: Individuals remember past positive events or anticipate future positive events.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Practice Gratitude, practices include: |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Three good things: Participants are instructed to write down three things that had gone well for them and an explanation why those things happened Seligman and Steen (2005). “Good things” include ordinary things in life such a friendly smile from a stranger, a colleague’s joke, or a neighbour’s helping hand. Individuals recall three positive events each night for a week, which emerged during the day. In addition participants provide a causal explanation for each good thing. |
| What went right? Individuals recall five things (daily) for which they were grateful. |
| Gratitude visit: Participants are instructed to write and deliver a letter of gratitude to a person they were grateful to, but whom they had never thanked appropriately. |
| Acts of kindness: Participants are instructed to count and report the acts of kindness they performed on every day for 1 week (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson 2006). |
Cultivate Connections, activities to enhance connections are:

- **Gift of time:** Participants are instructed to offer at least three “gifts of time” by contacting/meeting three persons about whom they care in a week (Peterson, 2006).
- **Art:** "Creating together" is simply the therapeutic use of art making within a group. In this study a magazine photo collage will be used to create a collage on a theme they will decide about.

**Loving-kindness meditation** is a mental exercise that individuals can practice every day (Salzberg, 1995). To engage in this exercise:

- Individuals sit quietly, usually with their eyes closed, and focus their attention towards their breath for several minutes.
- They direct this attention towards their heart for a while, before forming an image of someone they love unconditionally, perhaps a child.
- Attempt to cultivate the feelings they usually experience towards this person-perhaps feelings of warmth, tenderness, and hope, for example.
- Direct these feelings and thoughts towards themselves—that is, they feel warmth, tenderness, kindness, and so forth towards themselves.
- Subsequently, they attempt to extend the same feelings to an increasing breadth of individuals: their friends, their acquaintances, their managers, their rivals, or even strangers (Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008).

Many international studies have been undertaken where PPAs have been utilised to develop well-being in schools (Knoop, 2013; Macaskill & Denovan, 2013; Norrish, Williams, O’Connor, & Robinson, 2013; Seligman, Ernst, Gilham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; Waters, 2011). What all these studies have in common, is that the teachers are viewed as the ones who provide the support and care to the adolescents, which correlates with South African perceptions that teachers are the ones who should support and give care. In one South African study, Theron, Geyer, Strydom, and Delport (2008) developed a support programme for teachers, named Resilient Educators (REds). REds focuses on health promotion and resilience as well as the effect of HIV on teachers and learners, but does not incorporate PPAs in the programme. The use of PPAs to develop teachers’ experiences of well-being has thus received little attention to date. In this study, I intend to explore how PPAs might foster teachers’ experiences of well-being.
1.2.4 Problem statement

Teachers are expected to fulfil a supportive role (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015; Douglas, 2005) in addition to being a facilitator of teaching and learning. The demands of such a role become overwhelming when teachers are working in socio-economically challenged areas, such as contexts of poverty and disadvantage. As a result, their experiences of well-being suffer. Teachers therefore need to acquire strategies to enable them to create a supportive and sustainable environment, and to foster their own experiences of well-being. If teachers are expected to be agents of care, support and change in their schools and the community, they need to acquire strategies to foster their own well-being and support structures.

Workplace policies should be aimed at increasing well-being, and indeed policy in South Africa does promote teacher well-being as a vital component of quality education (Department of Education [DoE], 2010). However, the implementation of such policies remains problematic, and therefore this study aims to explore ways to help teachers to increase their own experiences of well-being through PALAR.

1.2.4.1 Research questions

Based on the above argument, the following primary research question will guide this study: How can teachers working in socio-economically challenging contexts foster their experiences of well-being?

Secondary questions are:

- Which PPAs might be of help to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being in socio-economically challenged contexts?
What are the benefits of a participatory action learning and action research approach to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being in socio-economically challenged contexts?

1.2.4.2 Research aims and objectives

Based on the research questions, the aim of this study is to explore:

- the PPAs that might be of help in socio-economically challenged contexts to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being;
- the benefits of a participatory action learning and action research approach to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being in socio-economically challenged contexts; and
- recommendations that can be made regarding fostering of teachers’ experiences of well-being in socio-economically challenged contexts from a positive psychology perspective.

1.2.5 Research methodology

Creswell and Creswell (2013) note that the nature of the issue that is addressed influences the choice of the approach chosen. In this case, the qualitative approach is the research method that will be utilised to explore one central issue, namely teachers’ well-being.

1.2.5.1 Research paradigm

A critical, transformative paradigm will guide this study. Asghar (2013) suggests that a critical approach to research provides insight by not only analysing and exploring the situation, but also contributing an agenda for change. Such change involves exploration of personal and professional values and beliefs. This study seeks to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being, and this is best done by involving the teachers themselves in the research process (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). The participants, in this case the teachers, will be actively involved in the research rather than being mere informants or trainees. This collaborative way of conducting research is best accommodated by the PALAR process.
1.2.5.2 Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR)

The PALAR design provides for both critique and change. PALAR focuses on improving situations as well as the learning that comes from participants’ critical and collaborative reflection on their personal and communal experiences (Fletcher, 2005; Wood, Morar, & Mostert, 2007). Critical, collaborative reflection involves challenging existing assumptions and looking for different ways of seeing things (Fletcher, 2005). PALAR is underpinned by democratic, participatory and emancipatory values (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Zuber-Skerritt (2011) says democratic values, openness and respect for different beliefs can lead to the development of a shared wisdom that helps to guide the participants in transformation and sustainable change – in this case, the development of teachers’ experiences of well-being. PALAR aims to break down barriers imposed by power relations, which implies that the researcher and participants are equal contributors, working together in a relationship based on respect and trust to realise sustainable change. Such emancipatory learning is concerned with understanding the nature and root causes of unsatisfactory circumstances in order to develop real strategies to change them (Thompson, 2000).

1.2.5.3 Research process

The research process is triggered by the commencement of the project (the development of teachers’ experience of well-being), followed by a reflection phase in which the expectations of the participants are identified (what change would we like to see?). In the research phase, methodological decisions regarding data collection and analysis are taken to gain clarity on the research question (how can we provide evidence of change?). Consequently, in the planning phase, achievable plans are identified to address the challenges (what action can we take to develop our well-being?). Thereafter, in the action phase, the action research tenets of agency, development and change are incorporated to address the challenge, after which the change
process is evaluated (how has our well-being developed?). PALAR cycles of action and reflection are demonstrated in Figure 3.

![Figure 3: PALAR cycles for this study (Adapted from: Zuber-Skerritt, 2014, p. 115)](image)

The first cycle of PALAR involves a start-up workshop to develop the strategic plan for the project and to build relationships between participants, followed by on-going cycles of action and reflection. The researcher and participants who form an action learning set (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015) meet on a regular basis to reflect critically on the process to enhance collaborative learning. An action learning set is a group of people who work collaboratively to solve complex problems of mutual concern, through a process of inquiry and reflection (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). Apart from critical reflection and relationships within the action learning set, it
is important that participants be given an opportunity for learning and change to be recognised by others, usually in the form of a celebratory presentation followed by a social event.

1.2.5.4 Procedure

Before the research commences, permission for the study will be obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the NWU (Potchefstroom Campus). Permission will be obtained from the Institutional Support Coordinator (ISC), which is the manager of the district where the school is located and representative of the Department of Education (DoE), as well as the principal. Informed consent will be obtained from the teachers concerned. Consent forms will be delivered to those participants who accepted the invitation that will be posted via WhatsApp by an independent researcher who has been trained to obtain informed consent, namely Dr Petra Erasmus (a Psychology lecturer at the Mafikeng Campus of North-West University). The outside party will make telephonic contact with potential participants to make an appointment with them to provide hard copies of the informed consent form and who will also explain the research to the participants during the same appointment. The manner in which the research should be explained to participants will be discussed by the student researcher and Dr Erasmus beforehand. The potential participants will have at least a week to study the informed consent form and to decide whether they want to participate. Participants will be invited by Dr Erasmus and on the informed consent form to contact either of the researchers if they have questions (contact information is provided on the informed consent form). Once the informed consent has been obtained, I will collect the data under the supervision and guidance of my study leaders. I will contact the participants to initiate the PALAR process. Furthermore, she will be able to collect the data effectively, as she has received training in qualitative data collection, specifically discussions, taking field notes, and thematic analyses during the course of the master’s degree in Positive Psychology, and has previously conducted qualitative research during her PhD in Education.
1.2.5.5 Positive psychology activities

The purpose of this study is to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being to empower them to deal with their diverse circumstances. The teachers will decide whether they want to meet weekly or twice a week. Every contact session will have PPAs (e.g. Best possible selves, Savouring, Practice gratitude, Cultivate connections, Loving kindness meditation as described in reflection thereon and choice of activities to do before the next contact session – to correlate with the PALAR cycles. From the second week, teachers will travel to the NWU (MC) where the venue will be prepared in an inviting way with refreshments.

1.2.5.6 Data collection and analysis

Qualitative, inductive methods will be used to generate and analyse data. This will result in an interactive process where themes will be developed from the data that the participants develop interactively (Creswell & Creswell, 2013).

Data generation and analysis will be done simultaneously, as each informs and streamlines the other (Charmaz, 2010). The generation and analysis of data is part of the PALAR cycles of action and reflection. The analyses will be done concurrently with the data generation and will conclude at the end of the six weeks.

1.2.5.7 Data generation

When PALAR is used, data is generated through an interactive process among the participants (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2010). In this study, data will be generated by utilising the open-format conversation method (Helguera, 2011) combined with various visual methods. These will include observations, autobiographical narratives, informal group discussions, visual mapping and diagramming, collective actions (learning by doing), such as drawing, painting and collage, reflective visual journals and semi-structured reflective discussions. PPAs
will be utilised to collect data. These may change according to the needs of the teachers, which might evolve through the PALAR cycles. In each contact session, the PPA will be explained and then the teachers will experientially learn how to do it in the session. They will continue to implement it until the next session, where they will then reflect on how it has affected their perceived well-being. Furthermore, relational interactive processes between the participants themselves (Kindon et al., 2010) as well as my observations and analysis of the process, will be used. The data will be captured through audio-visual recordings and photographs, field notes and the products of PRA (participatory reflection and action) activities (Maree, 2014). Photographs will only be used to capture participants’ artefacts (e.g. drawings) and will not be used to photograph participants. I and the teachers will reflect on the field notes to document the data.

**1.2.5.8 Data analysis**

Stake (2005) maintains that data analysis is a process of unlocking information hidden in the data, which the researcher transforms into meaningful and useful information. In this study, interpretative data analysis is used to analyse data. In the process, all the data generated will be closely examined to find constructs, themes and patterns. For this study, PALAR was chosen; therefore, the participants will participate in the primary data analysis and the researcher will analyse all sources of data more deeply in terms of the PERMA theory.

Clarke and Braun’s (2013) method of thematic analysis will be used to analyse the data manually. Boyatzis (1998) refers to thematic analysis as a way of seeing. A theme is a pattern found in the information that describes the possible observations, or interprets certain aspects of a research problem. Themes can be observed directly in the information or can be underlying the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998). In this study, interpretative data analysis will be used to analyse data. In the process, all the data from the PALAR process will be closely examined to
find constructs, themes and patterns. Thereafter, the themes and patterns will be compared and analysed. Clarke and Braun (2013) suggest six steps when analysing qualitative data. These are familiarisation with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and writing up. The researcher has experience in thematic analysis and all the participants will have a discussion after independent analysis to add to trustworthiness with regard to the data analysis.

1.2.5.9 Role of the researcher

With a PALAR design, the researcher is an equal participant just like all the other participants. The participants will work in partnerships. The teachers will provide their expert knowledge about their context and needs while the researcher, as equal participant, will offer information about possible PPAs to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being. Trusting relationships and open communication are of crucial importance. Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013, p. 11) state, “Unless time is taken to discuss collaboration, and what this really involves in roles, expectations and responsibilities, the relationship will not be conducive for co-generating knowledge through authentic cooperation in the research process.”

PALAR provides for an action learning process where the participants reflect on their mutual learning, while the action research component provides a framework for the generation, analysis and interpretation of data within each cycle (Wood, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). The researcher will engage in reflection, in collaboration with the other participants, with an attitude of ‘we learn from one another’.

1.2.5.10 Validity and trustworthiness

Kearney, Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013) describe three core components of PALAR and explain that these components contribute to validation, namely –
• the development of democratic, authentic, trusting and supportive relationships;
• continual, critical, collaborative reflection; and
• recognition of contributions and achievements of all participants.

These three components will form an integral part of this study. Herr and Anderson (2005) refer to *internal validity* as the trustworthiness of conclusions drawn from the data, while *external validity* refers to the generalisation of the conclusions to a larger population. Herr and Anderson (2005) identified the following principles for internal validity in action research (p. 55):

- **Dialogic and process validity** demands critical conversations and peer reviews in each of the PALAR research cycles. This will be achieved by the very nature of PALAR, because critical discussions and reflection are an integral part of the research method.
- **Outcome validity** involves determining the degree to which action-orientated outcomes are attained. The data will provide evidence of how teacher well-being has been addressed.
- **Catalytic validity** entails altered understanding of the participants, which leads to action or change. In a PALAR design, the involvement of participants in the research process aims to lead to change at cognitive, affective and behavioural levels. Evidence of how the teachers’ behaviour, emotions or understanding change will be provided through collaborative analysis of the data.
- **Democratic validity** entails the accurate representation of the multiple perspectives of all the participants in the study and an indication of whether the results are relevant to the local setting. The participatory nature of PALAR will help to ensure this.
- **Process validity** refers to the use of suitable research methods. Methods compatible with the paradigm and process of PALAR will be used in this study.
• Regarding *external validity*, the intention of the study is not to generalise the conclusions to a larger population, but to understand teacher well-being in the context of a specific rural primary school.

1.2.5.11 Ethical aspects

Positive psychology and ethics form an ideal partnership, because both fields endorse excellence and seek to understand and promote best practice (Giannopoulos & Vella-Brodrick, 2011). Furthermore, action research is inherently ethical, because the research participants are considered as research partners and they determine the actions to address their needs. Ethics is also about having respect for the participants and the establishment of a relationship of trust. In this study, participative action learning and action research (PALAR) will be utilised. At the core of the PALAR method are principles of democracy and humanity as well as mutual respect between all participants (Wood, 2013). To ensure ethical practices the following will be done:

• *Approval and permission:* The proposal for the study will first be submitted for small group discussion and approval (this group will consist of appropriately qualified professionals at the NWU Potchefstroom Campus). Thereafter, the proposal will be submitted to the Africa Unit for Transdisciplinary Health Research (AUTHeR) panel for approval. Finally, ethical approval for the proposed study will be sought from the HREC before starting the process of data gathering. Once the ethical approval has been received, permission will be obtained from the Institutional Support Coordinator (ISC), which is the manager of the district where the school is located and representative of the Department of Education (DoE), as well as the principal. Informed consent will be obtained from the teachers concerned.

• *Sampling, recruitment and voluntary participation:* The participants will voluntarily participate in the study by responding to an invitation that will be placed on WhatsApp.
Written informed consent will be obtained by an outside party trained therein to ensure that participants make a voluntary and informed decision. The researcher has adapted the template of the HREC-approved informed consent letter to meet the requirements of this study. Potential participants will be given at least a week to study the informed consent form and confirm whether they want to participate. In PALAR, the participants are part of the process. Participants will be fully aware at all times of the emerging findings, and they will be informed that they can withdraw at any time without reprisal.

- **Confidentiality and privacy:** The privacy of the individual and the school will be respected. Only partial confidentiality can be ensured as the research will take place in a group. To remedy this, participants will be asked not to discuss what might be revealed during the research. Furthermore, the researcher will take special note of what participants do not want to share, and group rules will be determined through collaboration between the participants and the researcher beforehand in order to protect group work. Participants will be made aware of this partial confidentiality in the informed consent forms. Furthermore, participants will be informed that their identity will not be documented in publication and/or presentation of the research and that pseudonyms and/or numbers will be used when analysing the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Audio-visual recordings and photographs will be downloaded onto a password-protected computer in a locked NWU office immediately after data collection and will then be deleted from recording devices and cameras to protect participants’ identities.

On the informed consent form, participants will be informed that the HREC has the right to inspect research records.

- **Risks:** The study to be conducted is considered to be a low-risk study, with the focus on PPAs. There is a possibility of fatigue, boredom, headaches, etc. as a result of the
data collection methods. If the participants experience this, they will be given an opportunity to rest and take a break during data collection. The possibility for emotional and psychological discomfort or dignity harm cannot be predicted. Provision for support regarding emotional and psychological discomfort, which may result from their participation, will be made. Resources at NWU (MC) will be utilised. There will be no financial costs involved in participating in this study. Rental cars will be provided to travel to and from the NWU (MC). Only partial confidentiality can be ensured as the research will take place in a group. To remedy this, participants will be asked not to discuss what might be revealed during the research. Furthermore, the researcher will take special note of what participants do not want to share, and group rules will be determined through collaboration between the participants and the researcher beforehand in order to protect group work.

- **Benefits:** Participants can benefit from the study by gaining an understanding of ways to foster their experiences of well-being. Participants may also come to understand and identify ways that can develop their experiences of well-being. Participants will not receive payment for their participation. The perceived benefits of the study are considered to outweigh the perceived risks. Furthermore, it is hoped that it will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on positive psychology, well-being and the PALAR framework.

- **Data storage:** The data will be stored for a period of seven years as required by the NWU. Hard copies of data or raw data (e.g. field notes, results of PRA activities) will be stored in an NWU storage area in a locked cabinet in a locked office. Electronic data (audio-visual recordings and photographs) will be kept on a password-protected, virus-free computer in a locked room at the NWU. Only the research team (researcher, supervisor and co-supervisor) will have access to the electronic data and participants
will be informed as such in the informed consent form. After the seven years, any data on paper will be shredded and electronic data will be deleted from the computer by a member of the research team.

- **Data analysis and dissemination of results:** The PALAR approach, where all the participants work collaboratively during the data analyses, ensures truthfulness and honesty. From the onset, the participants will be aware that the results of the study will be published and their permission for the publication of the results will be obtained by way of the informed consent form. The informed consent form also specifies that participants’ identities will not be disclosed in the publication. Once the study is completed, the researcher will do a short presentation to share a summary of the results with the participants.

- **Expertise, skills, qualifications and training:** The researcher has obtained her PhD in Education in 2011 and has enrolled for the Master of Arts in Positive Psychology degree where she has been introduced to the field of positive psychology and has also received training in research methods in positive psychology. She has received training in qualitative data collection techniques and thematic analysis. In this study, PPAs will be used to collect data, which will be analysed manually with thematic analysis. The researcher is working under the supervision of Prof. L. Wood (BA, BASS, MA, PGCHE, DEd), currently research professor, Education Sciences, NWU (PC), and co-supervision of Dr V Koen (PhD Psychology, MA Research Psychology, MA Psychology), who are both qualified to supervise and are knowledgeable on qualitative research and research in general.

- **Access and consent:** Appointments will be arranged with the ISC, the principal and teachers. They will be briefed on the purpose of the project, the research method (PALAR) and the intended activities and will be assured that no disruption of teaching–
learning activities will take place. Written permission will be obtained from the district office and the school where the study will be conducted. The project will commence once approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee of the NWU and permission has been obtained from the ISC, principal and informed consent from the participants.

1.2.5.12 Participants

The population will include teachers who work at the Ipeleng Primary School in Grade R–3. This school is situated in the rural context of the Ngaka Modiri Molema district of North-West. A relationship of respect and trust between the researcher and teachers has been established in the three years preceding the study during activities of a community engagement project. Participants will comprise qualified, registered teachers (i.e. members of the South African Council for Educators) in practice who work at the Ipeleng Primary School, who can speak English and who are willing to participate voluntarily. Apart from the indicated inclusion criteria, there are no other exclusion criteria. Since I has been involved with Ipeleng Primary School for three years (2012-2015) as part of a community engagement project, the presearcher and all the teachers at Ipeleng Primary School are part of a WhatsApp group. This platform will be used to invite and recruit teachers who would like to participate in this study. The size of the participant group will depend on volunteers, on the basis of first come, first served with a maximum of 12 participants. This maximum number was chosen, as the PALAR design requires a sample, which is not very big or which has too many participants. Participants will have to give written informed consent to participate.

1.2.6 Publication

The results of this study will be presented in article format and the manuscript submitted to the journal, Perspectives in Education.
1.2.7 Format

The research report will be according to the one-article format (as indicated in rule A4.1.1.4 and A4.4.2.9).

References


1.3 Approved HREC application

Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research, Training and Support

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL FOR HEALTH RESEARCH PROJECTS WITH HUMAN PARTICIPANTS AND BIOLOGICAL SAMPLES OF HUMAN ORIGIN

All applicants must please ensure that all required finalised documents as indicated in the checklist at the end of this document are included with the application. No additional attachments or version correction(s) will be accepted. If this does occur and the application was incomplete, then it will have to be resubmitted with all of the documents attached which could mean that the application may not be considered for the applicable meeting date.

SECTION 1: PROJECT CLASSIFICATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethics certificate number</th>
<th>NWU-00205-15-S1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title of project</td>
<td>Fostering teachers’ well-being: a participatory action learning and action research approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of approval</td>
<td>28/07/2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SECTION 2: PROJECT HEAD, CO-WORKERS AND SUPERVISORS

| Responsible persons      | Project head: Prof. L. Wood |
|                         | Project supervisor: Dr E. Wessels |
|                         | Study co-supervisor: Dr V. Koen |
| Name of scientific committee | Africa Unit for Transdisciplinary Health Research (AUTHeR) |
| Members of scientific committee | P. Bester, L. Kruger, H. Coetzee, W. Roestenburg, G. Reitsma |

SECTION 3: GENERAL PROJECT INFORMATION
Executive summary

**Title:** Fostering teachers’ experiences of well-being: A participatory action learning and action research approach

**Problem statement:** Teachers become overwhelmed in contexts of poverty and their experiences of well-being suffer. Teachers therefore need to acquire strategies to enable them to create a supportive and sustainable environment and to foster their own experiences of well-being.

**Primary research question:** How can teachers working in socio-economically challenging contexts foster their experiences of well-being?

**Secondary questions** are:

- Which PPAs might be of help to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being in socio-economically challenged contexts?
- What are the benefits of a participatory approach to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being in socio-economically challenged contexts?

**Aims and objectives:** The aims and objectives are to determine the PPAs that might be of help in socio-economically challenged contexts, to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being, and to establish the benefits of a participatory approach to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being in socio-economically challenged contexts.

**Methodology:** The qualitative, participative action learning action research (PALAR) design will be used. PALAR focuses on improving situations as well as the learning that comes from participants’ critical and collaborative reflection on their personal and communal experiences (Fletcher 2005; Wood, Morar, & Mostert, 2007).
**Expected outcome/significance:** Participants can benefit from the study by gaining an understanding of ways to foster their experiences of well-being through the use of PPAs.

### SECTION 4: ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

**Probable experience of the participants**

The participants are teachers who have requested help in improving their own sense of well-being. They will take part in experiential activities designed to improve their perceptions of well-being. The participants will generate the data themselves, by creating artefacts, having discussions within the team, and reflecting on their own learning at each session. They will have agreed to having their discussions recorded and their artefacts (e.g. drawings) used for research purposes. This is a low-risk study but should the researcher observe that any teacher is uncomfortable, she will suggest referral to someone qualified (NWU psychological support services).

**Choice of techniques/methods/procedures**

This study will follow a participatory methodology because the researcher wishes to facilitate the teachers to learn how to improve and sustain the improvement in their own well-being. Standard PPAs will be used, which do not require administration by a registered health professional. The researcher already has a prior trust relationship with the participants and they have requested this intervention.

**Dangers/risks and precautions**

**Dangers:** The study to be conducted is considered to be a low-risk study, with the focus on PPAs. There is a possibility of fatigue, boredom, headaches, etc. as a result of the data collection methods. If the participants experience emotional and psychological discomfort, which may result from their participation, will be made.

**Precautions:** Provision for support regarding Resources at NWU (MC) will be utilised.
this, they will be given an opportunity to rest and
will be allowed to take a break during data
collection. The possibility of emotional and
psychological discomfort or dignity harm cannot
be predicted. There will be no financial costs
involved in participating in this study. Rental
cars will be provided to travel to and from the
NWU (MC).

Benefits for participants

Participants will learn how to foster improvement in their own well-being.

Expertise, skills and legal competencies

The project head is an experienced researcher who uses participatory methodologies. She has supervised
several students in this methodology and conducted her own studies using PALAR.

The student researcher is an experienced teacher educator who has worked with this team of teachers for
some time and therefore there is a relationship of trust between them. The teachers have requested this
intervention.

Facilities

The data generation sessions will take place at the facilities of the Faculty of Education and Training at
the Mafikeng Campus of NWU.

Legal authorisation
Authorisation was obtained from the Department of Education as well as the principal of Ipeleng Primary School.

**Participant recruitment and informed consent**

The participants will voluntarily participate in the study by responding to an invitation that will be placed on WhatsApp (please see Addendum C for a copy of the invitation). Written informed consent will be obtained by an outside party trained therein to ensure that participants make a voluntary and informed decision. The researcher has adapted the template of the HREC-approved informed consent letter to meet the requirements of this study (please see Addendum B). Potential participants will be given at least a week to study the informed consent form and confirm whether they want to participate. In PALAR, the participants are part of the process. Participants will be fully aware at all times of the emerging findings, and will be informed that they can withdraw at any time without reprisal.

**Criteria for participant selection**

Participants will comprise qualified, registered teachers (members of the South African Council for Educators) in practice who work at the Ipeleng Primary School, who can speak English and who are willing to participate voluntarily. Apart from the indicated inclusion criteria, there are no other exclusion criteria.

**Announcement of study results to participants**

Once the study is completed, the researcher will do a short presentation to share a summary of the results with the participants but they will be informed throughout as the research progresses, since they will be active participants in generation and analysis of data.

**Privacy/Confidentiality**

The privacy of the individual and the school will be respected. However, only partial confidentiality can be ensured as the research will take place in a group. To remedy this, participants will be asked not to
discuss what might be revealed during the research. Participants will be made aware of this partial confidentiality in the informed consent forms. Participants will be informed that their identity will not be documented in publication and/or presentation of the research and that pseudonyms and/or numbers will be used when analysing the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Participants will be informed in the informed consent form that the HREC has the right to inspect research records.

Storage and archiving of data

The data will be stored for a period of seven years as required by the NWU. Hard copies of data or raw data will be stored in an NWU storage area in a locked cabinet in a locked office. Electronic data will be kept on a password-protected, virus-free computer in a locked room at the NWU. Only the research team (researcher, supervisor and co-supervisor) will have access to the electronic data, and participants will be informed as such in the informed consent form. After the seven years, any data on paper will be shredded and electronic data will be deleted from the computer by a member of the research team.

SECTION 5: STATISTICAL JUSTIFIABILITY

N/A

SECTION 6: ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

N/A

SECTION 7: ETHICS EVALUATIONS & RISK INSURANCE

Potential risks

None envisaged – normal insurance will cover any harm that comes to participants when on NWU premises.

SECTION 8: DECLARATIONS
Application and declarations by project head

I, the undersigned, hereby apply for approval for the implementation of the experiment as described in the preceding proposal/protocol and declare that:

8.1 The information in this application is, to the best of my knowledge, correct and that no ethical codes will be violated with the project;
8.2 I will make sure that the project is managed ethically justifiably from start to finish;
8.3 in the case of human participants (subjects);
   8.3.1 the project objectives cannot be achieved meaningfully through replacement of human participants with alternatives;
   8.3.2 I will put it clearly to all participants (subjects) and am satisfied with the principle that participation (including assent) in any research project is absolutely voluntary and that no pressure, of whatever nature, will be placed on any potential participant to take part;
   8.3.3 I will put it clearly to all participants (subjects) and am satisfied with the principle that any participant may withdraw from the study at any time and may ask that his/her data no longer be used in the study, without stating reasons and without fear of any form of prejudice;
   8.3.4 every participant who takes part in the experiment will receive the accompanying form for informed consent and it will be ensured that every participant understands the information (including the process and risks) fully;
   8.3.5 every participant will sign the informed consent in writing before the study commences, or give recorded oral consent when the former is not possible;
   8.3.6 the written proxy consent of the parents or legal guardians of all minor subjects will be obtained before the experiment commences;
   8.3.7 any foreseeable risk is restricted to the minimum, any permanent damage is avoided as far as possible and that appropriate precautions and safety measures are in place;
   8.3.8 confidentiality of all the information of all participants will be respected and ensured;
8.4 I and all co-workers/assistants/field workers are appropriately qualified, capable and legally competent to implement the proposed studies/procedures/interventions;
8.5 I will not deviate from the approved proposal/protocol and that I understand approval for the project will be cancelled if I deviate from the proposal/protocol without the approval of the Ethics Committee;
8.6 in the case of a full project (not pilot study),
   8.6.1 All pre-research for the implementation of the project (pilot studies) have been finalised completely;
8.7 the experimental design is such that it is scientifically justifiable;
8.8 where necessary, I have the necessary permits at my disposal or will obtain them before the relevant actions are carried out;
8.9 I will ensure that all raw data is stored safely and remains in the possession of the North-West University;

8.10 I will report in writing any problems or complications experienced during the project without delay to the Ethics Committee;

8.11 I undertake to respect intellectual property rights throughout and to avoid any form of plagiarism;

8.12 I will report annually to the Health Research Ethics Committee (or as determined by the Health Research Ethics Committee) on the prescribed form concerning ethical aspects of the project;

8.13 I will report to the Health Research Ethics Committee on the prescribed form concerning ethical aspects of the project when the project is terminated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student/Researcher</th>
<th>Initials and surname</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E. Wessels</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study leader/promoter</th>
<th>Initials and surname</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prof. L. Wood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.4 Summary

This chapter illustrated that an acceptable research proposal had been developed taking into account existing literature on the topic and general scientific requirements, and that ethical aspects – as far as can be foreseen – had been considered satisfactorily and taken into account in planning. After obtaining of all necessary approvals, the study proceeded. The research report on the PALAR approach to fostering teachers’ experiences of well-being is presented in the next section as a manuscript in article format.
Section 2

2.1 Manuscript in article format

This dissertation has been done in article format as indicated in the 2015 General Academic Rules (A4.1.1.4 and A4.4.2.9) of the North-West University (NWU). The manuscript and article style follow the requirements of the specific journal, Perspectives in Education, for possible publication. The author instructions of the journal are as follows:

2.1.1 Guidelines to authors for Perspectives in Education

Information for Authors

Articles are considered for publication provided that:

- The work is original.
- The copyright is transferred to PiE and the author has secured all permissions for the reproduction of original or derived material from a copyright source.
- The work has not been published previously and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere (in selected cases, this condition may be waived).
- The author has secured the permission of all named co-authors, who have agreed on the order of the names for publication.
- An approved ethics board (a copy of the ethical clearance certificate/letter should be made available to the editorial office) has ethically cleared the research on which the article is based.
- The article has been language checked by a certified language practitioner (a copy of the letter from such a language editor should also be made available to the editorial office).
- The author(s) subscribe(s) to PiE and ensure they are familiar with the style and content of the journal.

The review process takes between 3 to 6 months to complete. Authors will be informed of the editor’s decision on receipt of all of the reviewers’ reports. (Please note that it usually requires more time to review manuscripts submitted in the November-January period.)

PiE invites submissions in the following categories:

Research articles

Contributors are encouraged to submit typewritten manuscripts of no more than (6000 words) including references, notes and tables.

The following are considered when evaluating the suitability of a manuscript for publication in this section of PiE:
The manuscript offers new, original insights or interpretations and not merely a restatement of existing ideas and views.

The manuscript makes a significant contribution to the field and extends the borders of educational debate.

The manuscript is likely to arouse readers’ interest and stimulate debate.

The manuscript reflects sound scholarship and research design with appropriate, correctly interpreted references to other authors and works.

The content of the manuscript is accessible to the broad readership of the education community and not just specialists in the area addressed.

**General submission guidelines**

Please submit your article via email to pie@ufs.ac.za.

Name(s) of the author(s), title(s), and affiliation(s) should not be disclosed in the text.

The user needs to sign up using a valid email address in order to submit the article and receive feedback. Please note that all correspondence is done via email. Please direct all enquiries to:

pie@ufs.ac.za

Division of the text must be clear and logical into numbered sections. Subsections should be clearly indicated by using the following numbers to indicate the different heading levels:

**Level 1:** 1
**Level 2:** 1.1
**Level 3:** 1.1.1
**Level 4:** 1.1.1.1

No more than four levels of numbering should be used. **Note that this is only for formatting purposes and numbering will be removed from the final draft – do not refer to sections by numbers in the text.**

Tables and figures must be placed within their appropriate position in the article accompanied by the appropriate caption/heading. All scanned photographs/figures must be kept to a minimum quality level of 300 dpi. Diagrams should be inserted as images - preferably as jpeg or tiff files (not drawn in MS Word using lines, shapes and arrows). Tables and figures should be numbered consecutively and be accompanied by a brief heading for tables or caption for figures. Each table/figure must be referred to in the text.

Do not use footnotes. Use endnotes only (not more than five endnotes per article).

**Procedure for manuscripts accepted for publication**

Publication fees of R3500 per article published will be charged. Authors will be invoiced on acceptance of the article.
References

References are cited in the text by the author(s) surname and the year of publication in brackets (Harvard method), separated by a comma: e.g. (Brown, 2001). Page references in the text should follow a comma after the date, e.g. (Brown, 2001: 69).

If several articles by the same author and from the same year are cited, the letters a, b, c, etc. should be added after the year of publication e.g. (Brown, 2001a).

In works by three or more authors, the surnames of all authors should be given in the first reference to such a work. In subsequent references to this work only the name of the first author is given, followed by the abbreviation et al.: e.g. (Ziv et al., 2005).

For personal communications (oral or written) identify the person and indicate in brackets that it is a personal communication, e.g. (M Smith, pers. comm.).

List of references

Only sources cited in the text are listed, in alphabetical order. These should be presented as indicated in the following examples. Special attention should be paid to the required punctuation.

Journal articles:


Books:


Chapters in books:


Unpublished theses or dissertations:


Anonymous newspaper references:

Citizen. 2006. Education for all, 22 March.

Personal communications:

Not retrievable and not listed.
Electronic references:

No author:

Published under author's name:

PiE checklist (before submitting an article)

- Article is between 5800-6400 words
- Article is referenced according to the Harvard referencing method
- Article is language edited (proof must be provided with article submission)
- Article is in MS Word format
- Article has an abstract
- Article has 4-6 keywords
- Article contains little to no self-referencing by the author(s)
- A separate document containing author details must accompany an article submission
- A clear statement regarding ethical clearance and the approval process for the research must be made

References


2.2 Manuscript

**Fostering Teachers’ Experiences of Well-Being:**

**A Participatory Action Learning and Action Research Approach**

**Abstract**

Teachers face many challenges within their workplace that affect their well-being negatively, specifically those who work in under-resourced contexts. Although research indicates that if teacher well-being improves, a more enabling climate for teaching and learning is created, little support is available for teachers in this regard. The aim of this study was to work collaboratively with teachers to help them find ways to improve their own well-being. Following a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design, six participating Foundation Phase teachers met as an action learning set over a period of six weeks to reflect on their learning about how to improve their well-being. The findings indicate that frequent, informal social contact with colleagues, coupled with explicit action to focus on positive emotions, could improve teachers’ experiences of well-being. The PALAR design, integrated with Positive Psychology activities, afforded the structure for this to happen. This study offers insight into how a collaborative action learning process could help to enhance teachers’ ability to improve and sustain their perceptions of well-being.

**Key words:** Action learning, flourishing, Positive Psychology, teacher well-being, wellness.

**Introduction**

Teachers in socio-economically challenging contexts are working in difficult circumstances that affect their well-being (Dehaloo, 2011). Our experience in rural and township schools over the past three years, showed that the majority of classrooms are overcrowded and under-resourced. Furthermore, in such classrooms, teachers have to accommodate a range of learners with diverse psychosocial needs, stemming from multiple adversities attributable to their socio-
economic circumstances (Morgan, 2009). Rather than receiving extra support to cope with these difficult circumstances, teachers are often blamed when learners perform poorly in the national assessment tests. In addition, teachers are slated in the press for a lack of professionalism and they are generally touted as the cause of education being in crisis by the very government that is responsible for the crisis (Masondo, 2014) in rural and township education. Policy (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015) stipulates that teachers should perform a supportive role to learners, yet provides little assistance to teachers to help them fulfil this expectation. Despite teacher well-being comprising a vital component of quality education (Department of Education [DoE], 2010), in reality, teacher well-being suffers, leaving them demotivated, stressed and unable to perform the various roles expected of them optimally to ensure quality education (Horn, 2009).

Although the DoE introduced the Teacher Appreciation and Support Programme (TASP) in 2015 to improve teachers’ morale, reduce absenteeism related to health issues, and promote teamwork, with the aim of ultimately improving productivity and effectiveness, the accessibility of such programmes is limited (none of the teachers in this study for example had heard of it). In addition, once-off events, such as Teacher Appreciation Week or short workshops, are not what is needed to improve teacher perceptions of wellness. As Fullan warned more than 25 years ago:

Nothing has promised so much and has been so frustratingly wasteful as the thousands of workshops and conferences that led to no significant change in practice when the teachers returned to their classrooms (Fullan, 1991:315).

The importance of teacher well-being cannot be overemphasised. Research (Keyes, 2007; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) indicates that if well-being improves, individuals flourish, which in turn encourages innovative and flexible behaviour (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Thus, if teachers could flourish, they would be better prepared to fulfil their role as
supportive, caring teachers as well as to address the challenges that arise from the circumstances in which they teach. Yet, most professional development workshops in South Africa are focused on curriculum, school governance or human resource issues, rather than the supportive role teachers have to fulfil (Douglas, 2005). These ‘teacher training’ workshops are mostly theoretical and general in nature, positioning the teacher as a passive recipient of knowledge, rather than an expert, active contributor. Such an approach negates the valuable role of teachers’ prior learning and experience and their insights concerning the realities of their contexts (McNiff, 2016).

The present study aimed to generate knowledge about how to engage teachers in a collaborative process that would enable them to learn how to improve and sustain their perceptions of well-being. The guiding question was How can teachers working in socio-economically challenging contexts foster their experiences of well-being?

We first explain the theoretical framework that informed the study and the methodology used before presenting a discussion of the findings.

Conceptualising teacher well-being

We adopted a positive psychological understanding of well-being, which emphasises the improvement of quality of life to optimise human functioning by focusing on strengths and already existing resources (Wissing, Potgieter, Guse, Khumalo & Nel, 2014).

Positive Psychology highlights the development of positive affective states, psychological health and happiness (Seligman, 2011) and, importantly, recognises that individuals can be self-initiating agents for change in their own lives and the lives of others (Lopez & Snyder, 2009) to enable them to flourish. Frederickson and Losada (2005) describe flourishing as optimal human functioning that promotes growth and resilience.

According to Wissing et al. (2014) well-being is an integrated concept with both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions that complement one another. The eudaimonic element
constitutes functioning well, whereas the hedonic component relates to feeling good (Wissing et al., 2014). Thus, well-being is not just a matter of being able to do things effectively or efficiently, but also to feel positive about what you do and why and how you do it. Dodge, Daly, Huyton, and Sanders (2012: 223) explain well-being as being able to respond effectively to challenges by maintaining a balance “between changing intra or interpersonal and external demands”. Since it is unlikely that the external challenges experienced by teachers working in contexts of social and economic adversity will dissipate in the near future, learning how to balance resources against these challenges becomes an important aspect of teacher well-being. Teachers have to learn how to create a climate that would enable them to feel positive, be more engaged with their work and colleagues, and develop a sense of purpose in their teaching, all of which would improve well-being (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009).

Positive psychology has been used with relative success as a basis for interventions with teachers (Knoop, 2013; Norrish, Williams, O’Connor & Robinson, 2013), but the focus has tended to remain on activities delivered by an ‘expert’ facilitator, rather than on enabling teachers to create sustainable processes within the school to enhance well-being on a long-term basis.

The PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011), a multi-dimensional model, provides five pillars of well-being, namely positive emotions (feeling good), engagement (being completely absorbed in activities), relationships (being authentically connected to others), meaning (purposeful existence), and achievement (a sense of accomplishment and success). We used a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) approach to enable the participants in this study to learn how to promote these pillars of well-being within their workplace.

**Participatory action learning and action research as methodology**

This study was epistemologically embedded in a critical, transformative paradigm following a PALAR design and working in qualitative and inductive ways to generate and
collect data. Asghar (2013) recommends a critical approach to research to provide insight by not only analysing and exploring the situation, but also contributing an agenda for change. Such change involves exploration of personal and professional values and beliefs. This study seeks to foster teachers’ experiences of well-being, and this is best done by involving the teachers themselves in the research process (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). The participants, in this case the teachers, was actively involved in the research rather than being mere informants in an attempt to enable the teachers to foster their own experiences of well-being. This collaborative way of conducting research is best accommodated by following a PALAR design and working in qualitative and inductive ways to generate and collect data. PALAR is underpinned by democratic values and principles, clustered as the ‘seven C’ (communication, critical reflection, commitment, coaching, collaboration, competence and character building), developed through an action learning process grounded in the ‘three Rs’ (relationship, reflection and recognition) (Kearney, Wood, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

In addition, PALAR focuses on improving practical situations as well as on generating knowledge from participants’ critical and collaborative reflection on their personal and communal experiences (Fletcher, 2005). As teachers work together towards a shared goal, they develop a shared wisdom that helps to bring about sustainable change, in this case the development of teachers’ experiences of well-being. PALAR aims to equalise the power relations between the academic researcher and participants as they work together in a relationship based on respect and trust to learn how to transform their lived reality (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). Such emancipatory learning is concerned with understanding the nature and root causes of unsatisfactory circumstances in order to develop real strategies to change them (Thompson, 2000).

The PALAR cycles of action and reflection are demonstrated in Table 1. The purpose of cycle one was to develop a strategic plan for the project and to introduce the teachers to the
concept of well-being so that they could construct visual representations (collages) of their own perceptions of their own well-being. They then analysed the collages to identify their needs and expectations as well as to formulate achievable plans to address the identified challenges. From this exercise, the teachers identified the following areas that they wished to focus on to improve: dealing with emotions, improving relationships with each other; adopting healthier dietary and exercise habits, and learning how to handle their finances.

Cycle two entailed the introduction of activities to address these needs. As facilitator, the lead author engaged the teachers in deciding collaboratively on data generation and analysis methods to answer their research question, which they formulated as: *How have we improved our well-being?*

During the third cycle, the teachers reflected on the activities, evaluated the process and presented their learning at a celebration function to which they invited staff members from their school as well as guests from the local university campus.

**Table 1: Summary of data generation process and documentation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue of study:</th>
<th>Primary school where teachers were teaching at the time of the research.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants:</td>
<td>Six female, Foundation Phase Setswana teachers aged 25–63.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Cycle 1: Develop a strategic plan for the project</strong></th>
<th><strong>Time frame</strong></th>
<th><strong>Data generation techniques and documentation</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 1: Negotiation of roles, goals and norms within project. Introduction of PALAR; defining well-being using the PERMA framework. Construction and analysis of collages to determine teachers’ needs with regard to their well-being.</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>Field notes about what teachers perceive as well-being. Collage as visual data.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Cycle 2: Positive psychology activities and other strategies to address identified needs** |  |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|  |  |
The research took place in a rural primary school in North West, a province of South Africa, as a response to teachers’ request for help in improving their well-being. The lead author and the teachers decided to meet weekly for an initial period of six weeks in an action learning set. Qualitative, inductive methods were used to generate and analyse data, namely recordings of reflections in the action learning set meetings and presentations, and visual data such as the collages. Themes were derived from the data interactively with the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2010), and then thematically analysed by two of the researchers, first independently, then compared to reach consensus.

Trustworthiness was further enhanced by triangulation of data sources, member-checking of final themes, and a detailed audit trail (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Ethical clearance was granted by the institutional ethics board, which attested that the study adhered
to the requirements for informed, voluntary consent, confidentiality and measures to ensure no harm was caused to participants (Bretag, 2016).

**Discussion of findings**

Our research question in this study was: *How can teachers working in socio-economically challenging contexts foster their experiences of well-being?*

In response to this question, we present the findings of the three cycles (see Table 1) under three themes, (see Table 2), supported by direct quotations from the teachers, and control these findings against relevant literature sources.

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Improvement in relational well-being</td>
<td>• The importance of a relational space to improve well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• PPAs foster emotional awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Improvements in individual well-being</td>
<td>• The PALAR process allowed for gradual shifts in experiences of stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Simple changes led to significant improvements in experiences of well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. PALAR process enables teacher agency towards well-being</td>
<td>• Personal benefits for teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme one: Improvement in relational well-being**

The most striking difference experienced by the participants was in regard to relational well-being. The teachers had not had an opportunity previously to interact on more than a superficial level with their colleagues, nor had they ever thought of collaborating towards a mutual goal that was not directly related to the curriculum or learner performance. The benefit
was ascribed to the creation of a regular relational space, specifically dedicated to working on their own well-being and the activities completed within that space.

– *The importance of a relational space to improve well-being*

Teachers at this rural, primary school had no physical place where they could come together at breaks because the room that was intended as a staff room was too small for this purpose and had been turned into a store room. This led to the formation of cliques where discontent was fostered for some, or feelings of isolation for others. Teachers’ responses are provided verbatim and unedited.

> when we sit down at break … in my class, we just complain, about not having a comfortable space, no support (P2:7).

> During break, we have nowhere to go. So we will form small groups or sit alone in our classrooms (P1:7).

The creation of a relational space at work was identified as crucially important to improve well-being. Participants decided that they would meet once a week as a group and negotiated use of the mathematics laboratory for this purpose. They also created a virtual space via WhatsApp to communicate between scheduled meetings. By setting outcomes around the improvement of well-being, they ensured that the focus of such groups would be on sharing their reflections on their learning, so that it would not degenerate into a space for complaints. This helped to overcome feelings of disconnect and foster a sense of belonging:

> Once we had our 'sit-downs’ and we realised that we all shared the same personal problems … it made me feel … that I belong in this group. It was nice coming to our place each week and share (P5:23).

> With this group, you know – if you get something that we share, a joke, laughter … we start joking about, until I ask: Can we sleep now? At least, the stress is a bit better – once we share a joke on WhatsApp it creates … I think … a common space. Yes, we can say that connections improved, relationships improved, because we shared our worries and our positive emotions (P1:23).
As we sat together, discussing some other topic, we were passionate, we learned active
listening, interaction with our colleagues. We really learned in this small group. We
mended weak links … now … we are a team, we came together (P4:34).

According to Walsh (2011), relationships are of the utmost importance to individual
and collective well-being. In addition, good relationships are central to both physical and
mental well-being to enhance happiness, quality of life, resilience, cognitive capacity and even
reducing physical and mental health risks (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Although it was a
relatively simple task to organise a weekly action learning set meeting and set up the WhatsApp
group, the teachers had not previously been able to mobilise themselves to do this until the
PALAR process was created. Relationships are at the heart of PALAR since all learning and
development take place in small reflective groups underpinned by values such as trust, care
and respect (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

– Positive psychology activities foster emotional awareness which improves relationships

Initially, the teachers were completely out of touch with their emotions as they
struggled to name positive emotions.

I know what it is not … it is not stress, not anger, not frustration (P3:6).

The only thing that they were sure of was that they were stressed and overworked. The
idea of flourishing seemed something outside of their grasp:

I have too much stress, do you really think I will be stress-free? I want to flourish (P4:6).

Even the prospect of taking action to improve their well-being seemed too difficult to
accomplish:

we are so busy, it is the principal, it is the department and then even the trade unions come
with the all kinds of things they want from us and … the children. We can’t even eat or
drink tea, some of the learners are so naughty, they don’t do their work, and they are so
naughty … we have many challenges. I feel so tired as I sit here (P1:8).
To counter this, the lead author introduced two PPAs: Savouring (focusing on positive moments/experiences as they occur) and Acts of Kindness (doing deliberate kind acts for others).

To implement Savouring, the teachers decided to record funny incidents in their classrooms by taking photographs with their cell phones to share with each other via WhatsApp. The humour involved in this action helped the teachers to see their experiences in a classroom – usually linked to feelings of stress – in a more optimistic way (Achor, 2010). Sharing humour helped the participating teachers get in touch with their emotions and had a positive influence on their relationships with learners and with each other, the latter extending outside of formal working hours:

That day in class when I took that video … we watched it over and over and we laughed every time (P2:15).

I think it creates positive emotions, because now we did not focus on the hard work, but on the humour and how it brought us, as teachers, closer to one another (P5:15).

Our … connections improved, relationships improved, because we shared the positive emotions … it improved a lot (P1:23).

Humour is an effective coping mechanism (Frederickson, 2004), which strengthens intellectual, social, physical and psychological resources. The positive emotions elicited by humour enable people to become creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated, and healthy individuals (Fredrickson, 2002), all of which enable them to relate better to others.

Another activity that was introduced to enhance the participating teachers’ positive emotions and improve interaction with others, was Acts of Kindness, which entailed that the teachers are instructed to count and reflect on the acts of kindness they perform each day (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006). Focusing on doing and recording Acts of Kindness, helped the teachers to become aware of their capacity to care:

We are dedicated and caring teachers, I realised it … after this week … we are kind to our learners (P1:16).
As the project progressed, there was a gradual improvement in their experience of positive emotions and empathy towards each other within the sessions. Initially, they would come to the sessions, one by one, downhearted and complaining, but after the first month they came in a group, laughing and talking. The rest of the staff also saw this change and became curious to know what had caused it. The principal contacted me to ask when the project will be expanded to include the rest of the school as they could see a positive change in the attitude of the Foundation Phase teachers. At the celebration function, when the participants presented their learning to the rest of the school, the principal remarked:

I have witnessed miracles tonight. I was not aware that my staff could do this.

Every teacher could confidently identify his or her emotions, but they also said that, although their circumstances did not change, the way in which they perceived their lives had changed:

Well-being is all about Who am I? Worthy, strong, motivated. I may not have everything, but I am enough and I do enough. I strive very hard to make a positive change (P2:12).

Kindness to oneself and to others is associated with satisfaction (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010) and feelings of well-being (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Acts of kindness enhance gratitude and positive social relationships, which contribute in turn to improved physical health by reducing perceptions of stress (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Again, these two simple exercises made a visible difference in the well-being of the participants. It is, however, unlikely that the exercise would have had the same effect if the teachers had done it on an individual basis; it was the collective sharing and reflecting on the experiences which enhanced the learning and gave them a sense of belonging to the group by improving positive affect, interpersonal relations and a sense of purpose (Seligman, 2011).
**Theme two: Improvements in individual well-being**

The importance of the teachers being involved in determining their needs with regard to well-being within their specific context cannot be over-emphasised. They identified factors that impacted on their well-being and which needed to be addressed. In addition, the PALAR process actively involved the teachers in determining their needs with regard to well-being, guided by the five pillars of the PERMA theory (see Seligman, 2011).

- *The PALAR process allowed for gradual shifts in experiences of stress*

The teachers experienced their administrative workload as too heavy, and blamed it for their high levels of stress and related illnesses. Although they enjoyed the actual teaching, they could not cope with the amount of assessment and administrative tasks.

Who do not enjoy working with our children? (P1:6) [Everyone agreed].

It is just the paperwork that are killing me, you know … I have 38 Grade 2 learners and each one has four books, which they should work in and I should mark … (P5:6).

All of them complained on a regular basis that they were tired and that they could not face another demand.

I am sorry that I always complain, but the amount of work that I have to do … it gets to me … I need to remind myself constantly that the learners in front of me are my first priority (P1:18).

Initially, the teachers would constantly complain about their workload and how it made them feel weak and ill. Rather than using a specific positive psychological intervention, the lead author decided to try and influence their perspective by sharing her own experiences of a stressful job and how she coped. Gradually, they realised that every position has challenges and joys and that they could choose to focus either on the challenges or on the joys.

You know, Foundation Phase … we are facing the challenges of the learners … we spend time at school and few hours are home … but as we are sitting here, our mindset come so settled and we relate with each other (P4:28).
I am thankful, we know about unemployed people. They don’t have a job … they don’t have a job [silence] they have nothing. We have something to eat every day, somewhere to go. All of us … has the opportunity to work for God, right here at our school (P4:11).

I have learned that we must be grateful for what we have (P2:23).

The participatory action learning process based on relationship, reflection and recognition of everyone’s feelings and perceptions created the space for this to happen. PALAR views learning as holistic, drawing on emotions and spiritual understandings, as well as cognitive theories (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015). It is unlikely that this gradual change in attitude would have occurred if the lead author had merely delivered a series of positive psychology interventions to the teachers, rather than accompanying them on a journey of learning and development. This accompaniment also enhanced their feelings of being authentically connected to others (Seligman, 2011) who share the same experiences.

– Simple changes led to significant improvements in experiences of well-being

All the teachers were keen to improve their physical health and financial well-being, but they were uncertain of how to do this. Physical activity has the capacity to prevent mental illness, to foster positive emotions, and to buffer individuals against the stresses of life (Hefferton & Mutrie, 2012). Though I could not source a positive psychology activity that related directly to physical health, the link between well-being and health is well documented (Austin, Saklofske, & Egan, 2005; Brief, Butcher, George & Link, 1993)

For this reason I introduced the teachers to some simple stretching exercises. The teachers rated this simple change as the most helpful in making them feel better. Given the fact that lifestyle changes (Walsh, 2011) can be effective in both physical and mental health, the development of a PPA to enhance physical activity should be considered. I merely showed them some basic stretches to relieve muscle tension, and the teachers reported that the daily stretching reduced headaches and backaches.
It really helped me, I was having a problem with my back, but the one … where you just hang forward and swing your arms, helped me a lot (P2:22).

With the exercises, we were full of energy (P3:26).

Similarly, although financial well-being does not feature strongly in theoretical models in Positive Psychology, the teachers insisted that they wanted to address the matter, as it is something that they worry about. The teachers were adamant that a lack of financial security contributed to their lack of flourishing. The lead author then suggested inviting a financial planner to one of the sessions. When the participants reflected on what they had learned from the financial advisor and how they would implement the new knowledge, one participant made a remark:

You know ma’am, we have a problem with black tax (P3:20)

The teachers explained that ‘black tax’ refers to a tradition where an employed, younger family member is expected to support his or her elder family members, including those in the extended family. Such support does not only entail basic needs, but also extends to so-called ‘luxury items’. This suggests that, no matter how much a person earns, the expectations for family support just increase. A teacher, who earns a moderate salary, can therefore never really enjoy financial freedom (Mhlungu, 2015). Financial stress is thus a reality in the lives of many teachers. The findings from this study support the suggestion by McCoy, Ross and Goetz (2013) for financial planners and mental health professionals to inform themselves on each other’s fields. The authors suggest that interdisciplinary approaches are more effective to help clients, because attending to finances, emotions and relationships collectively has positive outcomes.

Theme three: PALAR process enables teacher agency towards well-being

The PALAR process contributed to the success of this project in two main ways. Firstly, the teachers were actively involved in the determination of their needs; thus they identified their desire to lead a healthier lifestyle and improve their financial well-being, something that
an outside ‘expert’ might not have thought of including since neither Financial well-being, nor healthier habits do not correspond directly with the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011). Secondly, the PALAR process provided a reflective, relational space where colleagues could share personal challenges. This regular, informal social contact with colleagues improved relationships.

Our … connections improved, relationships improved, because we shared the positive emotions … it improved a lot (P1:23).

We tried by all means coming together, doing some activities which involves each educator or teacher to participate and our relationship it become strong, and we worked together as a team (P4:30).

Once the teachers realised that they all shared the same challenges, their perceptions about their workload and stress gradually changed.

I realised that am not the only one with a workload, we are in this together and we are not going to change it. The only thing that could change it is to laugh about it, okay? (P4:32).

They also indicated that they intended to take action to sustain their feelings of well-being:

It is just that we discuss but we don’t do … at the end we will get there (P1:24).

Seek advice from financial advisors or professionals, so that you can become a free person later (P5:30).

The teachers reported that their sense of belonging, the improved relationships, the shared positive emotions and shared personal problems, contributed to their improved feeling of well-being. They also indicated that they enjoyed having a relational space where they could interact with one another and that being aware of their kindness added meaning to their lives:

When you do something good for other people, it will make you feel very good and fulfilled, for example, when some of the learners … it is easy for us to identify some of the learners who maybe … they don’t have food, but you know if this thing that are going to help others … that thing will make you to be fulfilled (P1:31).
The teachers reported that they felt confident enough to support colleagues from neighbouring schools and that they realised that they were a strong team. These realisations included that they could not change their circumstances or workload, but that they perceived themselves as capable of facing the associated challenges. The PALAR process always involves an event where participants can share their learning with others, both to recognise their learning and to educate and encourage the wider community (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). The value of the participatory learning process was evident in the presentations of participants at this event:

I have been discussing this issue with colleagues outside. Specially Foundation Phase educators. I told them that we start with ourselves, to attend to our well-being, not to teaching. They asked how can we also get together. You know, Foundation Phase [teachers] … we are facing the challenges of the learners … we spent time at school and few hours are home … but as we are sitting here, our mindset come so settled and we relate with each other. That particular teacher said, “The doctor diagnosed me with fatigue”… but she is still young …” the whole of my body is so painful.” I said we sit together and discuss our common problems, maybe financial … the other one says, “I also have a problem with finances. How can we be assisted?” This thing can be very big, we must keep on, keep on, as this lady said. Let us invite people from the area office … ja (P4:28).

This implies that the teachers have seen the potential for continuing action learning set meetings to enhance positive relations and ‘settle’ their minds. They do not just want to keep this learning for themselves, but have seen the value of the process for other teachers, indicated by their desire to share their learning with the Department of Education (DoE) in the district.

Having a collaborative process like PALAR together with PPAs, helped the teachers to become self-directed in terms of improving their own well-being. Since they were actively involved in the whole process, from determining their needs, to the choice and execution of activities, they took ownership and they said that they would continue to use the activities they learnt. The teachers were confident that they were able to sustain their own well-being and they indicated that they would like to extend the project to other schools. The two relational spaces
that were created, were still in use at the time of writing, and teachers were still active in sharing jokes and other experiences on the WhatsApp group:

So now we do have a team, we will work as a team, irrespective the condition or the background we are from, but you have shown that teamwork works importantly (P4:31).

Since this is an ongoing project, we will still be meeting at least once a month and additional activities, according to the teachers’ needs, will be introduced to ensure sustainability.

**Concluding remarks**

Teachers in socio-economically challenging contexts are working in difficult circumstances and are in need of support. The use of PALAR together with PPAs in this project, created a context where well-being could be developed on an ongoing basis. The ‘seven Cs’ (Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013) and the ‘three Rs’ (relationship, reflection and recognition) (Kearney et al., 2013) informed the process because frequent communication played a significant role in the formation of the authentic, trusting relationships. Although the teachers had a heavy workload and several responsibilities, their commitment to the project was an outstanding feature. Although not all of them could attend all sessions, they always made arrangements and provided valid reasons for not attending. Coaching, guided by questioning and dialogue, characterised the learning throughout the project and enhanced my understanding of the unique circumstances of the teachers’ conditions at school. During their weekly critical, collaborative reflections, they challenged existing assumptions (Fletcher, 2005) and tried to gain insight into existing problems as well as finding possible solutions for those problems, thereby increasing their competence to improve their own well-being. The integrity, mutual trust and respect which were created among the participating teachers, helped to ensure character building, as the teachers were enabled to share their learning and encourage others to follow a similar process to improve well-being.
The combination of PPAs, embedded in the PERMA model and coupled with a PALAR approach thus yielded positive results and learning that promises to be ongoing. The findings of this study show that teachers are perfectly capable of improving their own well-being if they are facilitated in learning simple, inexpensive PPAs, within a structured participatory process that develops them as action learners. The realisation that practitioners can improve their own quality of life can be of benefit to teachers and other professionals the world over.

References


Section 3

Conclusion and reflection

3.1 Conclusion

In this section, I will discuss the literature and empirical conclusions of the study, as well as reflect on my personal learning.

3.1.1 Literature conclusions

Most of the reports on positive psychology research are open access, which simplifies efforts to obtain these articles. A vast amount of research reports about different PPAs, applicable to this study, were available. These include Savoring (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011; Bryant & Veroff, 2007; Eisner, Johnson, & Carver, 2009; Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, & Mikolajczak, 2010; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007; Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003) as well as Acts of Kindness (Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & Sheldon, 2004; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006). During the literature search for this study, evidence was found about PPAs that have been utilised to develop well-being in schools (Knoop, 2013; Macaskill & Denovan, 2013; Norrish, Williams, O’Connor, & Robinson, 2013; Seligman, Ernst, Gilham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; Waters, 2011). In all of these studies, the teachers were viewed as the ones who provided the support and care. In South Africa, teachers are also viewed as the ones who should fulfil a supportive role (DHET, 2015; Douglas, 2005). The use of PPAs to empower teachers has received little attention to date.

When the project commenced, the teachers clearly indicated that they would like to address their lifestyle as well as their financial independence. Walsh (2011, p. 580) identified eight lifestyle factors that affect well-being. These are exercise, nutrition and diet, time in nature, relationships, recreation, relaxation and stress management, religious and spiritual involvement, as well as contribution and service to others. Walsh (2011) discusses the benefits of all these lifestyle changes, but does not provide evidence of procedures that were followed
to change these factors. With regard to financial independence, Irving (2012) and McCoy, Ross and Goetz (2013) suggest that financial outcomes are linked to well-being and active engagement in the financial process itself would be beneficial to participants. However, they also do not explain a process that will result in a change of financial habits. Although a healthy lifestyle and financial independence affect well-being, no evidence could be found of PPAs that change these two practices. This might be a deficit in the literature of positive psychology and could be addressed in future studies.

PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) provides a research context where the participants become active agents to identify and change their challenges. Zuber-Skerritt (2011, p. 40) states, “PALAR is more – and more powerful – than a simple methodology; it is a way of living, working and being.” This was indeed the case during this research engagement. The respect and understanding between the participants and myself grew weekly and it contributed to openness and honesty to really understand each other’s circumstances. Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013) provide examples of projects where PALAR was utilised for collaboration between higher education and community engagement in a South African context.

3.1.2 Empirical conclusions

This study explored how teachers working in socio-economically challenging contexts could foster their experiences of well-being, using a PALAR approach. The teachers, as co-researchers, provided reports of their experiences of well-being and three themes were identified from the data, namely improvement in relational well-being, improvement in individual well-being, and the PALAR process enabled teacher agency towards well-being. This study provides new insight and could assist in developing activities and processes to explore how teachers working in socio-economically challenging contexts could foster their experiences of well-being' in South African schools, specifically where teachers are working in adverse circumstances.
PALAR focuses on cultivating sustainable change through the participants’ critical and collaborative reflection on their personal and communal experiences (Fletcher 2005; Wood, Morar, & Mostert, 2007). In addition, PALAR is underpinned by democratic, participatory and emancipatory values, openness and respect (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). In this study, the teachers and I were equal contributors, while we worked together in a relationship based on respect and trust with the purpose to guide the participants in transformation for sustainable change. The combination of PALAR and PPAs provided a context of trust and respect where the participants could choose activities to enhance their experiences of well-being. The themes and sub-themes identified in this study were confirmed and supported by literature.

3.2 Reflection

Personally, I have learned that the empathy I have for both teachers and learners in diverse schools contributed to my motivation and endurance during the project. Although it lasted only six weeks, there were unique challenges – the same challenges that affect education negatively. The lack of planning from both the school management and the DoE, and the constant un-planned meetings by the unions all affected the project negatively, because meetings often had to be rescheduled. Initially, the teachers used to complain about their under-resourced and overcrowded classrooms, also about the lack of support from the DoE. I also shared my frustration about my workplace and personal life with them and I realised that these open and honest conversations helped them to realise that everyone has frustrations and that we should choose to accept the things we could not change.

I did develop as a researcher and gained experience specifically in the PALAR process and the way PALAR creates an ethical context within which to do research. Although I have been involved with the teachers for three years, PALAR allowed our relationship to deepen, and the element of trust was definitely enhanced; thus, I gained more insight into the personal circumstances of each participant. I again realised the importance of research to address the
challenges that teachers face at schools. I also gained experience in qualitative data analysis. I realised the importance of reading, re-reading and reflecting until the themes gradually emerge to become major themes, primary themes and sub-themes rooted in the evidence provided by the data. The input of the supervisor as well as the validation of the themes by the teachers, was crucially important in this process.

Conducting this study was both a great challenge and a wonderful opportunity to enjoy and appreciate challenges for my personal growth as well as my academic development. This opportunity enabled me to reflect on my own well-being and keeping a work–leisure balance. In future, I will use PALAR to combine my three academic responsibilities, namely teaching, research and community engagement into one to improve not only the quality of the student teachers, but also the education community in the context of the NWU (Mafikeng Campus).

**References**


